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TO: House Judiciary Committee
FROM: Jennifer Hill-Hart, Policy Assistant,
Montana Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence
DATE: 02/07/07
RE: HB 60 - Access to civil justice act, self-help law program

Good morning, Madame Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to you today. My name is Jennifer Hill-Hart and I am here to represent the Montana Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. The Coalition rises in support of HB 60, the Montana Access to Civil Justice Act.

Self-representation in Courts is growing significantly nationwide, in Montana, and in family law cases in particular. This proposed program would support survivors of abuse by allowing them to take control over their own lives. Many low-income survivors can not afford to hire an attorney to represent them in obtaining orders of protection, dissolutions, and parenting plans—all vital components of their efforts to gain independence and safety for themselves and their children. In fact, research by economists at Colgate University and University of Arkansas found that access to legal services was one of the most important factors in decreasing incidents of domestic violence. The study theorized that access to legal services helps victims achieve physical safety and financial security, allowing them to leave their abusers.

Although some survivors of domestic violence need attorney representation to fully protect their rights, many other survivors have shown they are able to handle their legal issues on their own. However, they need adequate forms, instructions, information, and support in order to do so. When and where adequate support has been available, we have heard from several survivors that the experience of representing themselves in court empowered them to make other positive changes in their lives. MCADSV supports HB 60 as a necessary program for survivors of domestic and sexual violence and stalking to receive the resources they need to competently represent themselves in court.

I would also like to offer a few words of personal support for this bill. For six months, I have volunteered as part of a pilot project that created a self-help legal workstation at the Lewis and Clark County Courthouse. I have seen firsthand how important access to forms, information, and referrals can be for people trying to resolve their legal problems; whether they be in the area of family law, landlord tenant law, or consumer law. I've also come to understand how many more resources are needed to help support those people who are forced to represent themselves.

Without revealing his or her name, I would like to read one of several appreciative e-mails we have received for the seemingly modest assistance we are able to give at the Helena workstation. *"I did want to write and let you know that I was fortunate enough to receive help from the good people in the Self-Help Law Office in Helena a few months ago. I was undergoing a very confusing name change and they were absolutely wonderful & indispensable help. I hope that this service can continue so that others may be helped as effectively as I was."*

If this legislation passes, it would provide for self-help workstations in other parts of the state and would ensure that we have adequate resources for people coming to those workstations. I encourage you to pass HB60. Thank you.